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### *Citation for published version (APA):*

Rhodin, L., & Mao, X. (2017). Religious Pluralism: A Habermasian Questioning and A Levinasian Addressing. *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 16(46), 49-62.  
<http://jsri.ro/ojs/index.php/jsri/article/view/830/720>

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RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: A HABERMASIAN QUESTIONING  
AND A LEVINASIAN ADDRESSING

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**Abstract:** The task of this paper is to clarify the notion of pluralism and religious pluralism against the background of disputations on the globalized challenges of religious pluralism, for example the incompatibility between different conceptions of religious pluralism, especially from the lens of a possible conversation on religious pluralism between Jürgen Habermas and Emmanuel Levinas. With a detailed reading into the development of the conceptualization of religious pluralism in each author, addressing the questions such as what is genuine pluralism and on what ground the conflicts within religious pluralism can be re-accounted, we make our passage from challenging the total reliance on political unification by the effort of Habermas, towards adopting a Levinasian alternative path that prioritizes ethical relation over individual ways of plurality in the realization of each one's good life. Even though it can be acknowledged that Habermas raised the right question against the relativism way of seeing pluralism, it is by Levinas, the ontological ground of pluralism and the universal dimension of the plural are thought not only through justice and politics but more importantly, through a way of responding to the non-familiar tradition with love, where human religion has a single dimension that is the transcendental notion of charity and love.

**Key Words:** Religious pluralism, Jürgen Habermas, Emmanuel Levinas, the proviso translation, face-to-face encounter, peace, love.

## 1. Introduction

In the contemporary world the concept of religious pluralism is highly problematic. Disagreements over how we best lay the foundation of the inclusive-pluralistic society are manifold. The religious expressions often impart choices on the political arena, and these choices sometimes clash. The task of dealing with this challenge, and negotiating this religious plurality, is complicated due to the incompatible approaches addressing religious pluralism. This problem calls for careful examination on the idea and nature of dealing with religious pluralism. Several answers have been formulated in this line of questioning, and in this article we will first of all examine the problematic conception of religious pluralism which sometimes risks catalysing relativism, before turning to explore the Habermasian ideas on addressing religious pluralism through rational political unification. We will though show the existing problems in the Habermasian approach, which lead us to find a way to address this problem from the point of view of Emmanuel Levinas. The unique notion of pluralism in Levinas shows us an alternative way to see religious pluralism. Instead of searching for a way to unify the sometimes conflicting practices of different religions, Levinas offers us a model to perceive pluralism based upon face-to-face encounter, which prioritizes peace, a peace that is achieved through responding to the other religion with charity and love. We will begin with a brief discussion of the problems in the contemporary discussions on religious pluralism which will be shown as lacking of willingness to search for a dimension for solidarity as well as an ontological unexamined philosophical conceptualization.

## 2. The problems of religious pluralism in the contemporary world

Understanding the concept of religious pluralism is a complex matter, and confusion often arises in the appearance of various incompatible conceptions that appear in the modern society. Religious pluralism is commonly referred to the coexistence of religious and secular individuals and worldviews. The mainstream idea of religious pluralism rejects privileging any value of one religion over others to avoid any prejudices. In liberal political tradition, pluralism is often seen as a fact or as an instrumental value (Galston 2002, 26-27). The liberal society has to uphold pluralism in order to achieve societal stability, which is presented in the genealogy of pluralism as a natural consequence of autonomous reason within the democratic system (Rawls 2005, 48-63). After the Enlightenment, philosophers praise diversities and pluralism without reservation. John Stuart Mill argues that the (religious) pluralism serves our search for truth, which is helpful to develop our individuality, which is also essential to social progress (Mill 1991). And in contemporary thoughts, according to

John Rawls, autonomous reasoning and plurality are compatible and complementary in liberalism which provide the fundamental provisions needed for this pluralism to thrive (Rawls 1971, 2005). Within these approaches, we clearly sense that they imply a certain value neutrality, which develops into the relative conception of all are welcomed, where the values are not properly examined in their own context. However, these values are sometimes in conflict and therefore we are forced to choose from a diversity of competing choices. Ultimately this choice is a choice among anonymous possibilities, which is a choice intimately connected with pluralism that dismisses the particular value, which underlines the freedom found in liberal states (Raz 1986, 17).

The contemporary discourse on religious pluralism is often presented as, firstly, the coexisting of various religious traditions, where the focus of disagreement is placed on which religion, dogma or worship, provides a 'true' belief, which should be seen as the primary source of divination. It is also discussed in an inter-religious manner, where difference of opinions regarding specific texts, event, ritual or practice within the same (singular) tradition is the main locus. But perhaps most commonly in today's discourse, religious pluralism refers to the coexistence of religious and secular individuals and worldviews. In this third approach, whether we understand 'religion' as living a 'religious life', or having certain religious beliefs, or as differentiated opinions on what is 'the good life'. They are, to echo Charles Taylor, all merely an option among many in our contemporary societies (Taylor 2007). Liberal societies are struggling to evaluate the characteristics of any given value, including the religious values that are ancient and has innate conflicts with values promoted by the Enlightenment. In order to be able to coexist with secular values in a post-secular society in a similar fashion, religious values are whether treated without historical context or being ignored as false value. A dilemma may rise when the value of a person's religion is in conflict with his or her civil responsibility. This is because, in the post-secular society, the value, or judgement, of a religion is not to be found in its apparent inherent properties, but rather in the valuation of the persons who insert value upon its practice. The individual's experience of religious pluralism in a liberal society does not only lead to the realisation that one's conception of 'good' is merely an option amongst many (Taylor 2007, 2-3), which rather leads, inadvertently, to a threatening of the authority of the idea of the 'good' itself (Mehta 2008, 77). Francis Schuessler Fiorenza acknowledges this notion as he eloquently asserts that religious beliefs in modern societies are principally "based upon personal convictions rather than upon authority" (Fiorenza 1992, 74). The problem is that it is futile for post-secular societies to proclaim that they are able to respect and protect anything beyond the individual's rights, and is much less protective of whatever the person praises and invest value to.

### 3. A Habermasian questioning of religious pluralism and its pragmatic consideration

The philosopher Jürgen Habermas has spent much of his academic career on paving the way of articulating how the civic society, government and transnational organizations may approach the dilemma of society's place in mediating between conflicting and competing value choices and worldviews of its citizens. In his seminal work *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Jürgen Habermas established an account of modernity as the result of a two-fold (Ashenden 1998, 119) process of rationalisation (Habermas 1984, 73-74; Habermas 1987). Habermas anchored this approach by Max Weber's vision of the 'iron cage' via a 'Western Marxist tradition' in dealing with the term *reification* (Habermas 1984, xxxvii), in order to set forth the relationship between system and lifeworld in his account of this rationalisation. Concurrently with this process of rationalisation follows a pluralisation of forms of life which shatters previous taken-for-granted meanings and truths. Habermas argues that such a process of pluralisation or 'disenchantment' brings with it a linguistification of the sacred (Habermas 1984, 141), which entails a rationalisation of the lifeworld, in other words, an undermining of shared background suppositions. This linguistification of the sacred opens up our shared notions to an increasing number of contested concerns and critical questioning, which leads to a growing need for justification (Habermas 1996, 97). According to Habermas, agreement among these contested values can be reached through explicit rational argumentation (Habermas 1996). Communicative rationality develops teleologically toward a more rational discourse, a mutual understanding, which challenges the original value of the various religious expressions. His theory roots the democratic practice in and through this discussion, resulting in the abolishment of infringements, and colonization of the individual's lifeworld, which unleashes the modern societies from previous cultural and ideological constraints. In other words, the ideas of his early works rest on the capacity of the actors within society, and on their successful rational argumentation. Such profoundly open communication in society would clearly combat fundamentalism which essentially is the "refusal of dialogue", to resound Anthony Giddens's (Giddens 1994) sentiments.

Habermas's dealing of religious pluralism through communicative rationality takes its importance from the perspective of the interconnectedness between religion and politics and the decisiveness of the political dimension in the public sphere:

[...]in the process of its democratic transformation, 'the political' has not completely lost its association with religion. In democratic discourse secular and religious citizens stand in a complementary relation. Both are involved in an interaction

that is constitutive for a democratic process springing from the soil of civil society and developing through the informal communication networks of the public sphere. (Habermas 2011, 27)

With the acknowledgement of the importance of religion and its coexistence for a functional society, Habermas admits that the coexistence between secular and religious values cannot be guaranteed through relying heavily upon individuals to partake in rational arguments and finding consensus in questions of religious truths and values. He turns to the interconnectedness of religion and the political in search for a more suitable approach. Habermas maintains that there is innately a dimension of religion in politics; religion and politics cannot be discussed independently from each other (Habermas 2011, 18). He argues that, a middle-ground position between the secular and religious participants had to be constructed, a path which he termed as the *institutional translation proviso* (Habermas 2011, 25-26), which contributes in the end to the political sphere. The proviso entails a translation of the religious arguments, religious reasons, into secular reason that is accessible to the political arena. In other words, the proviso works as an indispensable filter between the informal public discourse of debate, and the formal discourse of decision-making in parliaments or governments, which must be agreed upon via secular-rational argumentation politically. Through the shift from the focus of the micro-level of the individual to a macro-level located in politics, Habermas asserts that through politics in the democratic post-secular society, necessary provisions for resolving conflicts are made (Habermas 2006, 22-23).

Jürgen Habermas is certainly correct in emphasising the importance of rationality and the political dimension in solving conflicts within religious pluralism, however, there are existing problems in his approach. First of all, the context of religious pluralism is essentially a modern value emerging from the Enlightenment, in other words, a value originating from a discursive structure where Abrahamic traditions have been discredited (Erlewine 2006, 23-27). To situate a rational argumentation within this context infringes the religions that do not share values with the Enlightenment. Either the individual can embrace this religious pluralism context which contradicts with her tradition, or the individual needs to assert a more robust interpretation of her religion (Erlewine 2006, 28-29). Habermas's insistence on the need of rational actors engaged in mutual-opened dialogue in order to shape the public discourse, is facing severe questioning as it is not feasible to locate a consensus while accommodating religious plurality and at the same time hold an authoritative account of one's religion. Furthermore, in the religious pluralistic milieu, a context of pluralist theologies implies a predetermination of the results of interfaith dialogue, thus making dialogue superfluous. For this reason, having an open mind to other religious truths seem empty, and no Haber-

masian rational argumentation would be able to tackle the question of religious pluralism.

Secondly, to rely solely on politics to ensure peaceful coexisting and religious pluralism seems implausible, as the middle-path approach of the institutional translation proviso entails that all argumentation in the public sphere has to be in a secular-rational fashion, which already limits the religious value within the rational category thus undermines the neutrality of the condition of the communicative actions. Even though a certain adaptation can be identified throughout Habermas's works chronologically, where a strong desire to address the incompatibility between religion and secular and reach a *modus vivendi* is apparent in his later writing, a more inclusive way towards possible universal peace between religious plurality and secular civic society does not take part in his theoretical framework. The consequential peace built on pluralism in his more pragmatic considerations (Habermas 2006, 41-43) does not attain true neutrality but only to avoid the contextualization of each religion. As Charles Taylor points out: "the point of state neutrality is precisely to avoid favoring or disfavoring not just religious positions but any basic position, religious or nonreligious. We can't favor Christianity over Islam, but also religion over against nonbelief in religion or *vice versa*" (Habermas 2011, 37). Such avoidance is also experienced by many believers who are coming to the conclusion that liberal post-secular societies acknowledges them as individuals, but not their beliefs (Mehta 2008, 84-87). Where do we turn next, when Habermasian pragmatics fail?

#### 4. Levinas's conception of pluralism and religious pluralism

The Habermasian way of addressing the issue of pluralism of religion through the rational and the political is problematic, which fails to recognize the ultimate value of religion. And the very process of integration at the political prioritizes the political decisiveness which can legitimate certain constraints on traditional religious practice and neglects the real appeal of the believers. More profoundly, the Habermasian approach has an un-examined ontological presupposition on pluralism, especially referring to another famous philosopher who holds critical view to such ontological centred approach, Emmanuel Levinas, Habermas's way of addressing pluralism only offers an immanent picture. Even though it is hard to find any direct comment on Habermas from Levinas, what is Levinas's possible way of addressing religious pluralism comparing to Habermas is an intriguing question.

Next, we will turn to examine Levinas's ideas on the question of religious pluralism, which hopefully offers an initiative point for an ontologically alternative approach to religious pluralism. It is undeniable that Levinas has concrete views on the specific issues of religious pluralism in his writing, especially on the historical events at his time involving

relationship between the Jewish, Christian and Islamic religious traditions (Levinas 1990, 1999). But in the current discussion, we will not focus on his specific judgments as these judgments all have historical limitation. We will rather explore how the Levinasian pluralism, which will be argued as a pluralism of face-to-face encounter, can offer an alternative approach towards pluralism of religion in our globalized world that brings about peace.

As both Stella Sandford and Simon Critchley claim, pluralism in Levinas should be set aside from the mainstream view on pluralism (including the Habermasian one) where pluralism is seen as a “plurality of subjects” (individuals) that exist (Sandford 2000, 67; Critchley 2015, 99). Critchley singles out an attempt to question the presuppositions of such pluralism in Levinas, and concludes this critique as, the “manifold individuals” are only the same to one another and are simply forces for self-preservation (Critchley 2015, 99). This critique can be explained further from two aspects. Firstly, the mainstream way to conceive plurality does not acknowledge individuals as non-replicable and ignores the contextualization of the specific values. The formal way of describing one in the plural presupposes that the identity of one can be put in a paralleled position as the identity of another. In this approach, not only the uniqueness of one that separates it from the “all” is missing, the specific life span of the one, which is captured by the term *diachrony* by Levinas, is also reduced to the postulated presence of an individual at the time of the theorization. Levinas names the pluralism in the western tradition as a plural “given as a number” (Levinas 1979, 274) where the numerical different individuals are in fact presupposed by a monism of logics, which is more specifically the logics of synthesis. The logics of synthesis show itself in different forms, for example, the cogito, the presence etc., which hold the logic of the same as “ontologically privileged” and do not allow any absolute alterity beyond them (Levinas 1979, 274).

The second aspect of Levinas’s critique emphasizes the negligence of the notion of pluralism in western tradition of the importance of the face-to-face encounter between one and the other within the plural. The conceptualization of plurality that only accounts the factual existences of the multiple individuals does not properly address the priority of relationship between them. From a Levinasian perspective, the Habermasian dealing of “reasonable pluralism” (Hendrik 2010, 20) is based upon a sociality that is wrongly perceived as mechanical combination of individual. Levinas stresses that, sociality should rather be seen as composed by the face-to-face encounter between one and the other, which is primarily an ethical relation and concrete event of responsibility. The content of the reasonable pluralism as each individual’s pursue of good life for themselves rather exhibits a prioritization of egoistic interest, where the sociality of ‘for the other’ is only secondary and often alienated by the



egology (Levinas 1979).

Levinas proposes a sociality that is based upon the response one has for the other which establishes the foundation for a pluralism that recognizes and prioritizes the ethical dimension within the plural. And as Michael Morgan argues, Levinas's discussion on the "I" other relation can be expanded to accommodate more concrete others, for example, "other cultures, ways of life" or other religions, (Morgan 2007, 259) in which case, the notion of pluralism of Levinas can offer us concrete understanding on religious pluralism as well.

To be exact, the notion of pluralism appears with frequency in Levinas's early major work *Totality and Infinity* where Levinas, after making clear his critique on the pluralism in western philosophical tradition, brings about his own notion of pluralism, which is distinctive from "the numerical multiplicity" (Levinas 1979, 220), a pluralism that is built upon the one as a subject rather than the one as an individual. To be brief, the Levinasian subject is ultimately different from an individual with conscious, a cogito; rather, it is designated as "surplus of sociality", which is further defined as the very welcome of the stranger. This plurality of subject refuses the unified measurement based upon representation, knowledge, especially truth produced by this representation, and transcends the immanence of logics of the same (Levinas 1979, 221). As Corey Beals points out, the pluralism based upon subject for the other in Levinas opens up the totality of the same, where the other characterized as transcending any knowledge of the presence introduces the dimension of transcendence to the immanent multiple of the egoistic same (2007, 110).

One can find in *Totality and Infinity* an expansion of this alternative notion of pluralism through introducing the concept of fecundity (Levinas, 1979). Even though Luce Irigaray and Simon Critchley criticize the Levinasian concept of fecundity from the feminist perspective (Irigaray 2001, 119; Critchley, 1998), Sandford endeavours to discern the ontological importance of this notion from its biological origin. According to Sandford, to assume that the philosophical notion of fecundity has its origin from the biological fecundity "loses the sense in which the discussion is phenomenologically based and existentially intended" (Sandford 2000, 70). Even though it is still questionable that the sexism connotation of the very wording of fecundity can be totally dismissed this way, the philosophical significance of fecundity indeed outlines the structure of the transcendence of pluralism, especially in concern of time.

The father-son relation offers a perspective of plural that is a relation of "trans-substantiation" where the "I", the father, is "in the child, an other" (Levinas 1979, 267). To establish the notion of pluralism through fecundity, namely an ontological structure of "our relation to and through the child", (Critchley 2015, 105) makes the plurality prior to our existence, which is to say, as someone's child, we are born with "plural facticity"

(Critchley 2015, 105). Identity and alterity are not “logically incompatible” (Sandford 2005, 382) anymore, and in this way the innate conflicts, to which pluralism can lead, is also properly addressed. As Michael Fagenblat rightly points out, through the notion of fecundity, Levinas offers us a unique way to see how it is possible to orient towards a “new interlocutor” without conflicting against or assimilating it (Fagenblat 2010, 93).

Yet one notices that, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas’s approach towards pluralism appears to be apolitical compared to the Habermasian discourse where the political institutions are not addressed as much as the family relations. It is in his works after *Totality and Infinity*, especially in his later major work *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas includes the political and judicial importance via bringing forward the significance of the notion of the third party. When the subject is equally “confronted by the face of the other and the third”, the question of ethics becomes a question of justice (Simmons 1999, 83). The demand of justice calls for judicial system and the political institutions, where calculation of each individual based upon the universal category is needed. The politics that Levinas proposes, despite that it is inspired by ethics, has the same form as any other politics—a place of togetherness with contemporariness of all the individuals and comparison between right or wrong. Thus for this moment in Levinas, the Levinasian pluralism seems to be comparable to the Habermasian one where the system of justice decides the existence of plurality, where religious pluralism would be secondary to the judicial system.

However, as soon as admitting the importance of the judicial system, Levinas immediately stresses that this system is constantly disrupted by a dimension of transcendence, the ethical significance of any political expression, from which one can see that, different from Habermas, the political does not have the final saying in Levinas. For Levinas, even though the political can serve ethics via offering justice to the third party, it is a system with immanent interest-calculating which not only violates the transcendence of the face-to face ethical relation, but also brings back the totality of the same, that is a law written indifferently towards each individual. Levinas condemns war with “good conscience” (Levinas 1998, 160), and in judicial system violence cannot be avoided and the responsibility for the other becomes an indifference that only gives way to law. Totality of law, even though beginning by care for the other, turns the plural into pieces of empirical truth with multiple dimensions that does not prioritize the ethical value anymore.

The political discourse allows diversified meanings that are limited by the rationality of the presentation and cognition, which is lacking of a sense that can respond to the other human with care. This is to say, the universal dimension that addresses conflicts in religious pluralism is not rationality nor political decisiveness. Michael Morgan claims that one can find an implicit universal dimension in Levinas from his promotion of

“ethics of care and responsibility” (Morgan 2007, 259). He maintains, even though Levinas committed to “a plurality of worldviews or interpretive frameworks”, there is “room for a basic, orienting ethical demand” in his ideas, which serves as a ground to the communication of the plural (Morgan 2007, 260).

The exact wording “ground” is risky to be used to describe Levinas’s philosophy, as Levinas is always against the theoretical way of a ground searching process. To be exact, Levinas criticizes the way of finding a ground for the world that is “before all that is supports”, which as “an astronomic world of perception” leads to totality of the same (Levinas 1998b, 88). Nevertheless, Levinas does use the French notion of *en deça*, (Levinas 1998, xxv) which indicates, in a diachronic way, an immemorial past that inspires the presence. This immemorial past cannot be recovered in the presence to be attributed as the origin, which yet disturbs the immanence of the presence. This immemorial past denotes the presence with the ethical significance, which is more exactly in Levinas a unique sense through which all the plural meanings can signify.

Levinas points out, notions such as Merleau Ponty’s “fundamental historicity”, equalize the ideal with the plural ways of interpreting the unique sense of the ideal of transcendence. Transcendence in this case is always in the process of “coming into contact in a common world” (Levinas 1996, 43) where the transcendence is only interpreted via the common world. Even though it should be acknowledged that cultures, languages or different religions are translatable to one and other (or into the secular discourse), Levinas emphasizes that the motivation behind the opening of one tradition to the other, the initiation of any translation is often ignored behind the horizontal account of the multiple co-existence. For Levinas, to unite the plural through the common historicity invites violence and assimilation of alterity (Staehler 2010, 24). Beginning with the face-to-face encounter, the universal orientation of goodness follows which in its plural form sees peace as its priority (Morgan 2007, 263). The unique sense offers the communication within the plural, especially the encountering between two non-familiar religions, a directive and orientation (rather than foundation or ground) of opening towards the other, the stranger, which is in fact an orientation towards peace.

The conflict within the plural that invites judicial system for judgment is only conflicting when the plural is counted as the opinions that exist immanently enclosed within one system of experience (Levinas 1990, 173). But with the “unique” and “transitory moment” of disturbance from the sense of goodness, emerging face-to-face encounter is inspired by goodness where the new space that are not determined by any prior experience can be offered to such encounter so peace is possible, even when the empirical opinions are contradicting to each other. The conflicting pluralism dominated by logics of duality is thus seeking inspiration rather from peace, where the immanence of duality is disturbed

constantly and ultimately. The transcendence of peace is not just formally posed as opposing to the violence of immanence; rather in Levinas, this transcendence is clearly ethical which transcends the duality of immanence and non-immanence, violence and non-violence, as it is beyond any reasonable calculations and judicial systems, bringing in to the human presence with the “indeclinable responsibility” (Levinas 1990, 173). And in this way, peace can both presuppose pluralism and be reached through pluralism.

In this sense, the pluralism seen through ethical encounter offers us a way to establish religious pluralism beyond any unification of religions by secular political value. Religious pluralism is not a negotiation on the content of ways of practice in religion, but each religion’s response to the other religion that it encounters, and the *en deça* of such response being bearing “the entire weight of all” the others (Levinas 1990, 173). In Levinas’s own words: the power of monotheism is to bring one man to reply to the other, a “work of unification” (Levinas 1990, 178). This unification is not to put every one of the plural into the same system or following the same logic; it is nowise a unification based upon homogeneousness, but a new way to define human, and define religious pluralism as a human matter. We need to stress that, the humanity that orients religious pluralism in Levinas is ultimately different from Kant or Rousse’s definition that centre on rationality or freedom (Llewelyn 1995, 133). For Levinas, it is our ability to respond to the other, our responsibly for the other that defines us human which hence opens up the horizon of human communication as an issue of fraternity and love.

The ultimate ethical significance of religious plurality alters the horizontal way of the global communication, giving it a vertical dimension where each encounter between two religions, each moment of this encounter significantly lead to peace. Pluralism can only be positive and plausible if it is a pluralism among human beings defined by responsibility and thus we can conclude, through the Levinasian religious pluralism, the orientation towards peace with access to fraternity that is prior to any empirical difference, different religions can be in a movement of non-indifference to each other, a non-indifference we dare to call charity or love.

## 5. Conclusion

Therefore, from the above discussion, it can be seen that the disputation on religious pluralism in the contemporary world is partially resulted from non-examined ontological presupposition of the notion of pluralism. Habermas is correct to shed doubts on the religious pluralism that does not seek any form of solidarity. However, through a Levinasian perspective, the searching for unification through translating any religious value to the political and rational realm by Habermas relies

wrongly on the monism logics. The Habermasian proviso does not guarantee peace among the plural, which leads us to the Levinasian approach where we find the alternative way of establishing the conception of pluralism upon face-to-face encounter. Through this unique approach, we revealed that religious pluralism seen from Levinas is inspired by a dimension of transcendence which is from a re-defined humanity that is always ready to respond to the alterity with charity. In this way, we reach the conclusion that peace and love are the dimensions of unification of religious pluralism, which allows both difference and guarantees against indifference.

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